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Heidi's Years of Learning and Travel: Late-Pynchon's Academics

Towards the end of Thomas Pynchon's most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge* [2013], the reader is introduced to the academic research of Heidi, a character who is working on an article for the “*Journal of Memespace Cartography*” (334-5). Clearly supposed to be humorous, the passage ridicules the academic debates over irony and sincerity that have raged in recent years as a result of David Foster Wallace's well-known essay, “E Unibus Pluram”, a piece that itself targets Pynchon.

Despite its parodic nature, however, this passage is symptomatic of a broader trend in Pynchon's later writing: direct engagement with and representation of academic communities. Indeed, *Bleeding Edge* parodies Otto Rank and Jacques Lacan throughout (2, 245) and mocks the academic who uses the terms “post-postmodern” and “neo-Brechtian subversion of the diegesis” (9). Likewise, Pynchon's preceding novel, *Inherent Vice* [2011], connected the supposedly innocent academics working on the ARPAnet to the sinister histories of the ICBM traced in his earlier work, *Gravity's Rainbow* [1973].

This paper, moving to focus primarily upon *Bleeding Edge*, will examine the ways in which Pynchon's later novels interpellate their academic readers. Arguing that this is, in some ways, a continuation of a strategy that Pynchon has deployed since his earliest work (as noted by Mark McGurl in his seminal book, *The Program Era*), I will also here work to think more broadly about the wider political connotations of this representation of academia. As with many of the seemingly superficial aspects in Pynchon's novels, I contend that his academics are more politically charged, more over-determined than a surface reading alone might conclude.

Academia in Early Pynchon

Pynchon's novels have always included sly side-swipes at the academy. In *Gravity's Rainbow*'s brief glimpse of post-War America, the reader is instructed to look for the sadistic Nazi, Captain Blicero, “among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors”.¹ Indeed, “He is almost certainly there”, Pynchon tells us, “Look high, not low”. Academia, then, is seemingly elect, not preterite, as the now-tired Calvinist schema of that novel might have it.

This is, of course, most clear in that novel's depiction of science, even if not necessarily all scientists. As David Letzler notes, for instance, in his controversial defence of Edward Pointsman, “it is not the dominating drive for the 'true mechanical explanation' [science] that causes Pointsman to engage in manipulative enterprises like the Slothrop experiment; rather, it is the failure to realize such an explanation”. We should, then, I think, be careful not to conflate the enterprises of the academy always with specific individuals in Pynchon's works.

In this light, though, it is interesting that the adjectival form applied to Rocket engineers (and chemical/plastics engineers) throughout this early Pynchon text is usually “scientist”, not “academic”. In fact, the term “academic” only appears six times in *Gravity's Rainbow*, although in each case it is used disparagingly. Tchitcherine, for example, is told by Wimpe that “All we have are

1 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 749.

the thousand dim, academic theories”; Lyle Bland is described as springing for “those academic hookers doing the snickering and the credentialed lying”; “academic Sunday tranquillities” sounds a lot like “Mindless Pleasures”; there is a reference to the “Pökler singularity,” which occurs “in a certain crippled indole ring, which later Oneirinists, academician and working professional alike, are generally agreed is responsible for the hallucinations which are unique to this drug”; while it is speculated as to whether Jamf had “only remained behind in the trough, academic generations swelling away just ahead, or had he known something Pökler and the others didn’t”.

Indeed, it is fairly clear in this early text that Pynchon's academics are complicit with the war effort; hardly a surprising claim. The subtlety with which Pynchon makes this the case, though, is often startling. For instance, the reader is told that “Mossmoon, actually, is working out of Malet Street”.² This refers, obliquely, to the ephemeral Ministry of Information, which was situated inside the federated University of London's Senate House, on Malet Street, during the war. This historically true conflation of academic library and administrative centre with propaganda organisation is buried beneath a single seemingly throwaway clause in Pynchon's novel. Interestingly, of course, it then requires the type of historical and literary reading practices that the academy fosters in order to pick up on the critique. Without claiming the academy as the sole arbiter of truth, the depth at which such a critique of the university is buried is more easily detected by academic readers. There is a strange co-dependence, in other words, between the need for academic reading and the anti-academic message, to put it far too bluntly, that emerges.

Over the course of Pynchon's career, academics have continued to feature. In *Vineland* we are told that Weed Atman is “preoccupied with the darker implications of a paper on group theory”. Most obviously, *Against the Day* is saturated with academics, primarily mathematicians, both historic and fictional (if such a divide is a fair one to make within an intra-diegetic universe). In fact, along with the assembly of famous scientists at the convention on time travel, its obsessions with quaternions, the Riemann hypothesis and more, Pynchon's massive 2006 novel is rich with possibilities for academic critique. That said, the tone in *Against the Day* appears more celebratory of its physicists and mathematicians than in *Gravity's Rainbow*; for instance, while Tesla's tower might be linked to the Tunguska event, this is only implied far more obliquely than the earlier text's line about “academic hookers”.

Bleeding Edge

Although there are other prominent instances of the university in Pynchon's oeuvre – famously, Oedipa walks through the campus at Berkeley, finding a politicised space that “was like no somnolent Siwash out of her own past at all” – *Bleeding Edge* becomes the foremost satirical representation of the academic humanities. As I've written elsewhere in relation to Theory and philosophy in Pynchon's novels and as I've briefly retraced in the past few minutes, Pynchon strikes me as having a relationship with literary studies that is conflicted. At once dependent while also frustrating. Let me focus on how this is encoded within *Bleeding Edge* and to then ask what we might be able to draw from these instances.

First of all, let me turn to Pynchon's reference to a fusion of Otto Rank and Jacques Lacan, at least as I read it. On page two of *Bleeding Edge*, we are told that “The Otto Kugelblitz School

2 Pynchon, p. 228.

occupies three adjoining brownstones between Amsterdam and Columbus...the school is named for an early psychoanalyst who was expelled from Freud's inner circle... It seemed to him obvious that the human life span runs through the varieties of mental disorder as understood in his day – the solipsism of infancy, the sexual hysterics of adolescence and entry-level adulthood, the paranoia of middle age, the dementia of late life... all working up to death.”

At a first evaluative glance, we might think of this as a straightforward reference to Otto Rank. After all, Rank shares a first name with Pynchon's ball-lightning-surnamed character. Rank was also prominently cast out of favour in Freud's inner circle for his near-heretical take in *The Trauma of Birth*. However, and its worth pointing out that I am not a specialist in psychoanalytic approaches, Rank's theories do not seem to fit that closely with Pynchon's description of Kugelblitz. Rank proposed that there was a phase before the Oedipal (the pre-Oedipal) in which a human life is spent attempting to recover from the trauma of birth. By contrast, Jacques Lacan is a figure we might more closely associate with “the solipsism of infancy”, given his focus on the mirror phase and the moment of self recognition. Indeed, Lacan is explicitly mentioned later in the novel, ironically having been put out of business by supposed “neoliberal meddling” – even though Lacan's “variable-length sessions” have been decried as a mere exercise in money-spinning and may be the reason that Leopoldo has such a “decent practice”.

Of course, Lacan sits at the heart of at least one psychoanalytic school of literary criticism and much contemporary Theory owes some form of debt, particularly in the works of Žižek. It is also, clearly, the case that a great deal of contemporary fiction makes side-swipes at dense literary theoretical approaches. But this seems to be particularly acute in *Bleeding Edge*. Furthermore, while, as I've noted elsewhere, Deleuze and Guattari are parodied in *Vineland*, the reference to a character who speaks of the “neo-Brechtian subversion of the diegesis” in *Bleeding Edge* is a particular swipe at an aesthetic application of social theories and/or philosophy.

The term itself is, in fact, an accurate rendition of the particular act at this moment in the text. It refers to the moment when Reg Despard first discovers that he can zoom on his video camera and begins doing so, totally unnecessarily, while recording a movie to sell on the bootleg market. The diegesis, of course, refers to the narrative inside the frame. Reg's zooming disrupts the realist certainty of what is being seen and forces the viewer's attention onto the framing device itself; Brechtian alienation subverting the diegesis. At the same time, though, there is a parody underway of the complex terminology, used, in this case, by an “NYU film professor”, perhaps Robert Stam. Tracing the specificity of this hostility is not straightforward, however, and, as above, it would be a mistake to simply consider extra-textual referents as true one-to-one mappings. So far as I know, however, Tom LeClair was the first to suggest a connection between Brechtian alienation techniques and Pynchon's writing in his 1989, *The Art of Excess*, an aspect to which Stefano Ercolino has recently returned in his writing on *The Maximalist Novel*, so there are a range of possible targets at which this parody might point.

The other aspect to note, however, is that the only reason that the NYU professor is able, at this point, to comment upon the “neo-Brechtian subversion of the diegesis” is because “Reg managed to sell one of his cassettes” to this Professor. In other words, the shady underworld of the 1990s pirate video scene that Pynchon uses as a parallel to the contemporary piracy space and the Deep Web sits beneath this parodied academic pronouncement. There are a range of interpretative

paths that we might follow from this point: 1. academia seems complicit with the system of piracy that precedes the hashslingerz project of Gabriel Ice, an aspect that might be radical but is also entwined with the recuperation of alternative hidden under-spaces by venture capital. “Someday there’ll be a Napster for videos, it’ll be routine to post anything and share it with anybody”, Reg remarks. Yes, indeed, there will be.; 2. academia is making pretentious statements about elements in Reg’s filming that don’t exist or were not intentional, even though the text, like many of Pynchon’s novels, is concerned with hidden digital spaces of plausible deniability; projected worlds.

The other interesting moment on which we might briefly dwell is the use of the phrase “post-postmodern” in proximate connection to the aforementioned neo-Brechtian spiel. This ties in with a theme pertaining to irony and literature that runs throughout the entire novel and, particularly, the deliberate reference to the debates around New Sincerity and the works of David Foster Wallace, as classified by Adam Kelly. In one sense, this is a continuation of the discourse parody that was seen previously. Indeed, as Robert Eaglestone suggests, the term “post-postmodern” is fairly ridiculous. The mere proliferation of -modernist suffixes is now becoming an almost-silly way in which we seek to classify any new literary movement. (i.e. base any new taxonomy of literature on a named paradigm that, in its canonical high-form, ostensibly has “newness” as its guiding principle). On the other hand, once more, the debate around irony and sincerity that is at least part of the characterisation of post-postmodern literature is one that has broader political ramifications for society. While Pynchon’s caustic remark through Maxine casts the debate as overstated – that it seems, in this quarrel, as though irony “actually brought on the events of 11 September” – there is surely an attempt at a deeper societal diagnosis than this acknowledges. And, after all, since when has Pynchon become such a fan of using causal connection to dismiss an argument?

There is a final element of Pynchon’s treatment of the academy to which I here wish to turn, those elements to do with societal isolation. If Pynchon depicts academic arguments as overstating their influence – “brought on the events of 11 September” – he also depicts the denizens of the university as insular individuals, communicating obscurely among themselves and powerless against the larger forces, inefficacious except to lament the current state. In *Bleeding Edge*, for instance, Professor Lavoof is the “generally acknowledged godfather of Disgruntlement Theory” and develops the “Disgruntled Employee Simulation Program for Audit Information and Review, aka DESPAIR” (87).

The main jab, perhaps, at academic insularity, though, comes through a critique of dissemination and reach of scholarly communications. Indeed, even before we get to academia, *Bleeding Edge* has several moments that deal with information dissemination. For instance, Maxine says to Gabriel Ice, “Come on, it’s only a Weblog, how many people even read it?”, to which he responds, “One is too many, if it’s the wrong one” (137). On the other end of the scale, Reg Despard speaks of a future age of information overload, in which there is “way too much to look at” and in which, as a consequence, “nothing will mean shit” (143). This all comes to a head in the parody of Heidi writing the article for the “Journal of Memespace Cartography” entitled “Heteronormative Rising Star, Homophobic Dark Companion” that makes the aforementioned argument that irony has supposedly taken the fall for 9/11.

This strategy – parodying niche academic publications – is certainly seen elsewhere. In

Ishmael Reed's recent novel, *Juice!*, there is a prominent reference to an article in "*Critical Inquiry*". At this moment in that text, Bear describes how this journal will "fill an entire issue" with analysis of his cartoon of OJ Simpson "pretending to stab a white woman with a banana", which "sends out a whole bunch of signs".³ The critique here is one of triviality and over-reading. The implication is that the unpacking of the obvious semiotics of this cartoon – with its phallic and racial registers – is trivial and yet those authors publishing in *Critical Inquiry* will be more than happy to waste their breath with verbose commentary on a straightforward matter.

Even more, though, there seem to be two phenomena lurking behind this type of representation and that I'm currently working on in a book length work on academia in current metafiction: 1.) as Pynchon points out, there's way too much to look at, a statement that runs true for academic research under our current systems of evaluation where publication is used for accreditation, so we might consider whether this then means that "nothing will mean shit"; 2.) even while purporting large-scale societal diagnoses, like the argument about 9/11 and irony, academic journal publications have incredibly small circulations, largely because of the very strange circulatory economics that sit behind them; 3.) like many of the other spaces depicted in *Bleeding Edge*, the academic communication system has come under disruption from the digital world.

I'm going to stop now, leaving you, of course, on the brink of revelation and having only unfolded an introduction to the type of material that we might consider when thinking about Pynchon's academics. I'll only close by noting that, in naming one of his academic characters Heidi, Pynchon points to the Swiss fictional antecedent, the title of which was Heidi's years of learning and travel. Certainly, for *Bleeding Edge* and its peripheral, but persistent, satire of academia, irony has not died.

3 Reed, *Juice!*, p. 193.